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Recommended Citation

O'Hara, Susan; Pritchard, Robert; and Zwiers, Jeff (2014). "The Academic Language Development Program: A Capacity-building Approach to Supporting Secondary Teachers of English Learners," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/59>

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The Academic Language Development Program¹⁴: A Capacity-building Approach to Supporting Secondary Teachers of English Learners

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Keywords: academic language, capacity-building approach, professional development

Abstract: This study reports the results of the first phase of a multiyear project designed to develop a capacity-building, professional development model for teachers of English learners. Preliminary analyses show that teacher knowledge and use of appropriate instructional approaches improved, but challenges that still need to be addressed were identified.

The main goal of this project is to develop, implement and refine a capacity-building professional development (PD) model that provides support to secondary teachers in teaching academic language to English learners (ELs) in support of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Academic Language Development (ALD) Program is designed to build local capacity by focusing attention on three groups: 1) secondary teachers (focal teachers); 2) teacher leaders who support focal teachers; and 3) school-based instructional leaders. The intention of this capacity-building approach is to develop the particular knowledge, skills and practices that are needed by each group to ensure that teachers are well supported to enact ALD practices in their classrooms. In addition, the model is designed to increase the likelihood that support for the use of these practices will be sustained over time.

Meeting the needs of ELs in schools is an urgent focal area for educators. Recent waves of immigration have led to the enrollment of many students for whom English is not their first language. Despite the increase in ELs, teachers report being underprepared to meet their academic needs (Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006). In addition, ELs are more likely to drop out than their English-speaking counterparts, and a documented achievement gap exists between ELs and native English speakers (Anstrom et al., 2010). While a number of variables contribute to these findings, the lack of ALD is one of the most significant because academic language forms the foundation for learning across all disciplines.

Proficient use of - and control over - academic language in English is the key to content area learning in our schools. Given the nature of today's academic demands, lack of proficiency in academic language affects students' ability to comprehend and analyze

¹⁴ This paper reports on the first phase of a multiyear National Professional Development grant funded through the Federal Office of English Language Acquisition (OEELA).

texts, limits their ability to write and express themselves effectively, and can hinder their acquisition of academic content in all academic areas (Abedi, 2007, p. 16).

This is especially important with the implementation of the CCSS because academic language plays such a critical role in their implementation. The CCSS, for example, place a high emphasis on argument-based reasoning, reading and writing complex texts, and engaging in academic discourse across disciplines. Francis et al. (2006a) link academic language development to these EL challenges, “[t]here is little disagreement among researchers and educators about the importance of the development of academic language for student achievement, or that limitations in this development are the root of most ELs’ academic difficulties” (p.9).

Academic language development is particularly problematic for adolescent ELs who enter the educational system in secondary school. These students have the dual task of mastering complex course content and developing English language proficiency, with fewer years to master the English language. They also enter the school system at a stage beyond which literacy instruction is generally provided. Therefore, adolescent ELs need skillful teachers in all secondary classes and grade levels who have the knowledge and expertise necessary to facilitate their language and literacy development in English as they simultaneously learn, comprehend, and apply content-area concepts through that second language (Garcia & Godina, 2004; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

Further complicating this issue is the fact that many teachers equate academic language with content vocabulary, which neglects other critical dimensions of academic language development. One study found that equating content vocabulary with academic English can inhibit student learning of academic communication in science and more complex scientific concepts (Bruna, Vann, & Escudero, 2007). Mohan (2006) argues, “[s]implified understandings of explicit language instruction, in leading to simplified science talk, result in simplified science” (p. 52). Across the literature on academic language, experts highlight that teachers need to move beyond only teaching specialized vocabulary to include teaching other aspects of language such as: a discipline's complex grammatical structures and discourse patterns (Carr, Sexton, & Lagunoff, 2006; Zwiers, 2008); disciplinary habits, behaviors and cognitive features such as the ability to think critically (Merino & Scarcella, 2005); and how to use language within particular functions and settings (Carrier, 2005; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

Academic language, as operationalized in this study, is the set of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse strategies used to describe complex concepts, abstract ideas, and cognitive processes (Schleppegrell, 2004; Swartz, 2001; Zwiers, 2008). The three dimensions of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse can be broken down even further into features that can be observed in lessons and student work. Figure 1 shows the three dimensions along with their associated features and skills.

Figure 1 - Dimensions and features of academic language

Dimensions	Academic Language Features	Academic Language Skills
<i>Vocabulary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content terms and collocations • Figurative expressions and multiple meaning terms • Affixes, roots, and transformations • General academic terms (<i>aspects, consider, as long as, perhaps, evaluate</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Figure out the meaning of new words and terms in a particular message • Connect to underlying concepts • Use new words to build ideas or create products • Choose and use the best words and phrases to communicate the message
<i>Syntax</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence structure and length • Transitions/Connectives • Complex verb tenses and passive voice • Pronouns and references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craft sentences to be clear and correct • Use of a variety of sentence types to clarify a message, condense information, and combine ideas, phrases, and clauses.
<i>Discourse</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization and text structure • Voice and register • Density • Clarity and Coherence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine features to communicate, clarify, and negotiate meaning • Create a logical flow and connection between ideas • Match language with purpose of message

For districts and schools, a related challenge is to develop a system of support for teachers within schools and districts that will enable and promote their ongoing learning. Attending to teachers' ongoing need to learn how to teach subject matter content to ELs is an integral part of developing a PD program that can have long-term impact. Our model of PD includes the following components: (a) training teacher leaders on ALD rubrics; (b) developing shared understandings of key elements of academic language instruction; (c) building foundational knowledge of ALD; (d) identifying specific learning goals for focal teachers; (e) building processes for collecting, selecting, framing and presenting videos of teachers' own practice within a professional learning community; (f) developing materials, resources, and tools to support teacher leaders as they work with focal teachers on the appropriation of these instructional practices into their own practice, and as they learn and practice instructional moves through "approximations of practice" (Grossman et al, 2009) aligned to ALD elements; and (g) providing ongoing feedback to teacher leaders on their coaching/facilitation practice.

The research questions we sought to answer are:

1. What kinds of professional learning experiences do teacher leaders need to support focal teachers for effective ALD instruction?
2. How, if at all, do teacher leaders' knowledge and practices regarding supporting other teachers for the ALD of ELs change following PD?
3. How, if at all, do focal teachers' knowledge and practices regarding ALD change following PD?

To answer these questions, we conducted in-person observations of PD sessions as well as focus group interviews with participants. We also developed a knowledge-use survey that measures participants' understanding of ALD concepts and practices, and their uses of these in their roles as teachers and teacher leaders. We administered the survey pre-and post-participation. Additionally, we conducted individual interviews with instructional leaders to develop understanding of how they perceive their role and how they are supporting teacher leaders. We developed an instructional practice protocol that was applied to study changes in instruction over time. We also observed teacher leader-focal teacher interactions to examine how support provided by teacher leaders changed over time.

We began data analysis by measuring the gains in knowledge/use and instructional practices to see whether participants made measurable gains during the course of the program. We also examined differences in gains for participants who began the program at different initial levels on the knowledge/use scale, and we examined associations between changes across measures. For example, do participants who gain more on the knowledge/use scale also see bigger gains on the ALD protocol? These analyses relied on regression techniques. We ran these analyses at the teacher level but adjusted for the hierarchical nature of the data where teachers work within schools (e.g., using hierarchical linear modeling or a similar approach). Here we were able to examine whether differences in effects existed depending on the initial practices of participants and on the differences in practices in different school contexts. In order to study the nature of teachers' engagement in this PD, we applied the "content analysis and analytic induction method" as well as the "constant comparative method" (Merriam, 1998) to identify patterns and themes that emerged from these data. Specifically, the data were coded for themes related to the components of the PD that afforded change and for the academic language instructional practices.

Preliminary analyses of data show that teacher knowledge and use improved as well as that teacher leaders needed a deeper understanding of the ALD practices than the team had originally anticipated in order to start working with focal teachers. The teaching practices showed signs of improvement in some of the areas, but a number of challenges were identified, especially related to structure and routines to encourage student participation in academic conversations. The following components of the PD were identified as affording change: (1) video illustrations of practices; (2) practical tools and instructional moves to implement practices at different levels and to move from one level to the next; (3) opportunities to collaborate with peers; (4) facilitated studio time that afforded opportunities for integrating practices into their own classroom curriculum for their specific students; and (5) opportunities for teacher leaders to understand the practices and practice implementing them in their own classrooms before supporting the focal teachers.

Findings from this study suggest that PD models designed around the key, research-based practices of effective andragogy hold great promise for authentic, generative teacher knowledge development. More specifically, our model of PD combined a number of design elements, grounded in the research literature on adult learning theory (Zepeda, 2008), that fostered teachers' ability to create and implement innovative practices to meet the academic language needs of their ELs. These include being:

- situated in practice;
- grounded in adults' experiences;
- engaged in active learning;

- focused on the process by which adults take control of their own learning, including how they set their own learning goals and locate appropriate resources.

Identifying instructional practices that develop all aspects of academic language associated with high student achievement gains can help improve the quality of instruction for ELs while helping all students meet the CCSS. Yet researchers have increasingly suggested that fostering teacher knowledge and practice in areas specific to EL instruction and academic language development is a critical, but under-researched, area (Casteel & Ballantyne, 2010; McGraner & Saenz, 2009; Vogt, 2009). By identifying the essential components of a capacity-building, professional development model that can be used to guide the design and implementation of professional learning experiences for teachers, this study provides a potentially powerful approach for improving the quality of instruction for ELs.

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